

# Jane Batkin – Rethinking the Rabbit



## Revolution, Identity and Connection in Looney Tunes

Voice actress June Foray once recalled how Chuck Jones was able to quote Mark Twain and, in the same breath, discuss *Aeschylus* (King, 2013). Yet culture and animation have often shared an uneasy relationship. As critic Steve Schneider claims, “in all the vivisections of popular culture, non-Disney animation was either ignored, scorned or given the shortest of shrift” (1994: 18). In its classical period, only Disney was viewed as representing ‘art’ by critics; Looney Tunes, conversely, was seen as being “deficient in grace” (White, 1998, p. 40). The argument of culture resounds through the annals of film and animation. The question: if it can be applied to cinema why not animation? becomes: if it can then be applied to Disney, why not Warner Bros.? This critical shift didn’t occur until much later, in the 1960s. However, the period between the late 1930s and 1950s reveals that the cartoons of Looney Tunes are multi-layered, with revolutionary themes, complex connections and characters possessing psychological traits. Schneider (1994), Sandler (1998), Crafton (1998), Wells (2002), Maltin (1987) and others have written about the importance of Looney Tunes. Beyond the anarchic slapstick and hard, hilarious confrontations, Warner Bros. created an animation filmography that is culturally very significant and reveals itself within, whilst also alluding to what is beyond, the frame.

## Culture

Before we ‘rethink the rabbit’ we should first address how we are using *culture* in this context. The value of culture, as it is applied to music, literature, painting, film and society, has been de-coded, dissected and deciphered in numerous ways by notable philosophers such as Arnheim, Bourdieu, Adorno and Horkheimer. Arnheim states that great art requires an “exalted kind of seeing” (2004, p. 5), whilst Bourdieu stresses that culture is enacted by all, that it is a game and that there is no way out of it (Robbins, 2000, p. xi). He suggests that culture is not “static” but malleable and argues that our positions are affected by our *tastes*, that more value is applied to some tastes than others (p. 32).

The Frankfurt School, founded in 1923, conceived popular culture to be ideological, that works of art were only free “when seen from the outside,” that is, they did not reflect the soul (Jay, 1973, p. 177). Benjamin argues that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (ibid), and the school became renowned within Western spheres for its critical studies theory, known as *Kritische Theorie*. The free spirit of man was in jeopardy, claim theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer; he had become an “object of forces beyond his control” (p. 52). Exiled in California, after fleeing Nazi Germany, Adorno and Horkheimer claimed that the culture industry was

enslaving, more so than the open domination practiced in Europe in earlier years, and cited American popular culture as evidence of this. For Adorno, culture impressed an identical stamp on everything; it had become “openly, and defiantly, an industry obeying the same rules of production as any other producer of commodities;” it was both phoney and non-spontaneous. Importantly, however, the School saw art essentially as a protest of the humane against the institution (pp. 9, 216, 179). Art, then, represents revolution within the Frankfurt School’s theory of culture as commodity.

Critics of culture have found the subject problematic, in terms of self-positioning (as noted by Adorno in his essay, “Cultural Criticism and Society”). Timothy White, in his essay, “From Disney to Warner Bros.: The Critical Shift,” suggests that film critics write “as if they were slightly embarrassed by their trade” (1998, p. 38). If this is so, and film as art creates discomfort, White laments, imagine the uneasiness felt by animation critics.

Film theory truly emerged in the 1960s, with the New Wave movement in Paris. Prior to this, cinema’s cultural value had been largely overlooked by critics. Tom Gunning labelled early cinema as “expressionist” (qtd. In Belton, 1994, p. 10) and 1920s film was seen as retaining its origins in ‘the world of amusement parks, vaudeville and burlesque’ (Belton, p. 18). The Cinematheque Française began screening old movies in the late 1940s and early 1950s to film fanatics such as Truffaut, Goddard and Rohmer, who enthused over American commercial cinema as well as European works and thus rewrote the traditional canon of film (p. 299). Andrew Sarris, cinema critic, adopted this approach and introduced Auteur theory to the U.S. in the 1960s, inciting a revolutionary rethinking of American cinema by critics and scholars. His book *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1996) focuses largely on America’s ability to produce high art cinema through its mainstream work.

*Film Quarterly* produced a special animation issue in 1964, in which post-Disney animation was compared to post-war European cinema. Greg Ford compared Tex Avery to Bunuel, likening him to “a Walt Disney who has read Kafka” (White, 1998, p. 44). Hoberman similarly saw the influence of Frank Tashlin in the films of Godard and declared that the European sensibility of Warner Bros. created art (p. 45). White discusses Richard Thompson’s seminal article “Meep Meep!” in which Roadrunner was ranked among “the most austere pared-down works of modern art” (p. 46).

Thompson notes audience expectations of cartoons had been steered by Disney; however Warner Bros. created cartoons that lacked condescension to children and “like the best subversive and surreal art, they were recognized as dangerous by defenders of propriety” (Thompson, 1976, p. 129). He claims further that the cartoons of Chuck Jones conform to New Wave theory in the rule of situation and character dominating plot, that Jones exercised this with a “special purity” in his Road Runner films, “it is always the same situation, repeated several times in each cartoon” (p. 131).

## **Beginnings**

Classical Hollywood cinema, prior to the 1960s, traditionally avoided excess of emotion and of plot (Belton, 1994, p. 22). Central to the narrative was the goal of the character; he or she possessed stability, knowledge and was “psychologically coherent” (p. 25). Coherence was provided by “purely physical” movements of characters as they chased and achieved their goals (ibid). The chase

reverberated through film and into animation, until Disney's features began favouring morality and the journey of 'life' over the simplicity of a chase and a goal. The chase defines Looney Tunes; but here it becomes multi-faceted and layered with cynicism, anarchy and empathy. Coherence and psychology within classical American cinema reflects and is reflected in the Warner Bros. animated short of the late 1930s, 40s and 50s.

Borne along on the wave of early cinema, the Warner Brothers moved to Hollywood in 1918 and set up a studio on Poverty Row, in offices that Jack Warner likened to the City dump (Warner Sperling and Millner, 1998, p. 69). This gritty setting was home to their first comedy, *His Night Out* (1918). Warner Bros. Pictures Inc. was formed in 1923 and the brothers celebrated by throwing a party featuring bootleg gin (Warner Sperling and Millner, 1998, p. 77). The early 1920s dawned, with industrialist and renowned anti-Semitic Henry Ford attacking Hollywood's film industry as "Jew-controlled." He went on to declare "now the world is in arms against the trivializing and demoralizing influences of that form of entertainment as presently managed" (p. 72), an open attack on cinema and ethnic culture.

Warner Bros., however, embraced its roots; it became a name synonymous with gritty film noirs and antiheroes. The studio can be seen as representing *the real* through its genre choices such as *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1946) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Curtiz, 1938). There was an earthiness to this cinema that removed it from the escapism offered by other studios such as Paramount and MGM. Beginning their Hollywood career in Poverty Row, the Warners didn't lose touch with their roots and their ethnic characters helped them pitch their products with a sense of immediacy to a more "urban audience" (Belton, 1994, p. 74).

The studio's interest in the antihero and the gritty realism of its cinema becomes something of a mirror to the stable of Looney Tunes work that emerges later; *the real*, representing truth and confrontation rather than escapism, can be applied to the animated shorts of Warner Bros. just as much as the 'chase' of classical Hollywood cinema.

Leon Schlesinger, an enthusiastic producer, approached the studio and asked if he could begin producing a series of animated shorts (Maltin, 1987, p. 224). Bosko became Looney Tunes' first star, however he was gag rather than character driven and this early animation offered little change from the Fleischers and Disney. When Tex Avery arrived at the studio, he found himself hired immediately and given a crew of young animators, some of whom were ex-Disney employees, to work with. They were placed in "Termite Terrace," a dilapidated bungalow on the Warner Bros. lot and left largely unsupervised to create a new style of cartoon that ultimately distanced itself from the Disney formula (p. 223). The stage was set for a new identity in animation, driven by a revolutionary approach, and heading for confrontation.

## **Revolution**

The animation wing of Looney Tunes was often seen as a lunatic asylum (1998, p. 118), in which parodies were made and assaults took place. The animated stars were "hard and brassy and confrontational" (Schneider, 1994, p. 20) and they dealt with relevant, real concerns. The animators and directors, left unsupervised, quickly took an independent stance that removed them from the

cute, moral characters being conceived of at Disney. This declaration seemed to say “look at us: we can turn the cartoon upside down and inside out.” Schneider has described cartoons as being perceived as “throwaways” for the child audience (p. 18); this complements the idea of discomfort among critics as they try to analyse the form as ‘art.’ However, Schneider argues, the Warners’ animated characters were to become “the cornerstone of what amounts to a library of modern folklore” (p. 17). Much as Bugs’ declaration of War in the short *Bully for Bugs* (Jones, 1953) (Furniss, 2005, p. 124), Avery, Jones, Clampett and their peers declared war on the animated short.

Critical recognition could be seen as the studio’s desire; to be acknowledged as the purveyors of art, or at least of cartoons to rival Disney. Certainly a revolt takes place, against the other studio (many of the animators were ex-Disney staff), against Producers and Hollywood (Crafton: 1998, pp. 101-120). The animators at Warner Bros., whilst embracing their freedom to create exciting new outputs, were equally stifled by the high turnover of work expected of them (pp. 110-115). *The Exposure Sheet* was a newsletter, within which comments were made about Disney and other competitors, as well as references to the lack of film recognition, “Oh, for an Oscar!” (p. 115), and the excessive workload at Warner Bros. These feelings stirred a revolution and transferred onto the cel itself, leading to its unique deconstruction.

Because of Warner Bros.’ reputation for live action gritty noir, the animators felt compelled to compete with these films in order to create ‘toons’ that were wittier, sharper and more savvy (Bianculli, 2004). Schneider explains how Warner Bros. cartoon division “with deliberate intent, picked up on the snappy and street smart tough guy attitudes cultivated on the sound stages right next door” (1994, p. 21). From Poverty Row to Termite Terrace, a sense of origins, earthiness and realism pervades both the live action and animation outputs of Warner Bros.

Parody became the weapon of Looney Tunes. Harry Warner, it is argued, didn’t know where the artists were housed or what they created; he once commented that all he knew was that they made Mickey Mouse and the animators assured him, jokingly, that they would continue to keep Mickey on top (Farra et al, 1989, p.: 89). The Looney Tunes wing was created to make money cheaply for Warner Bros. through their animated shorts, and they worked 42.5 hours a week, over the contracted 40 hours (Crafton, 1998, p. 110). Jones comments “we were grossly underpaid, but we still did what we wanted to do” (Furniss, 2005, p. 24).

Revolution was at work in the office, sneaking under the radar of the bosses. Jones, in an interview, explains how the directors and writers would stop working whenever the production manager walked by. Unbeknown to him, an electric light network had been rigged under every animator’s desk to alert them of his approach. The manager remained forever bemused about where the work came from and how it was achieved (Jones, 1989, p. 25).

Industry constraints are clearly relevant here, but within these constraints, the dynamic team began to break free, fuelled by the desire to reach and connect to an audience in a very different way to Disney. In deliberately avoiding the Disney aesthetic, Warner Bros. animation wing achieved the unthinkable: they created an exciting new brand of cartoon that challenged the art form. Looney Tunes’ complex body of work involves “structuring layers of references and suggesting a world of

infinite behavioural possibilities” (Putterman, 1998, p. 31).

Tex Avery's unique style and humour were pivotal in enabling Warner Bros. animation to transcend its Bosko boundaries. Labelled as “Arch-Radicalizer” and “resident innovative genius” (Ford, 2009), Avery's style changed the landscape of the cartoon. Schneider notes that Avery's “gag-filled anti-authoritarianism and his purposeful demolishing of sentimental expectations put the studio on the course that would earn it a niche in American culture” (Schneider, 1994, p. 47). Chuck Jones explains “Tex, more than any other director, was fascinated by the limitless possible extensions of the medium” (Farrar et al, 1989, p. 102), whilst Thompson notes of Avery, “If he strikes below the belt, he is also capable of giving metaphysical vertigo through his interplanetary visions” (Thompson, 1976, p. 130). Avery pushed animation through boundaries, creating self-aware characters and limitless scenarios.

In *Daffy Duck and Egghead* (Avery, 1938), the chase is the focus of the plot. Egghead connects with the audience, breaking the fourth wall and asking the silhouetted figure in the front row of the cinema to ‘sit down’ and, after a second warning, shooting him. Daffy Duck is maniacal in this short, announcing, “I’m not crazy, I just don’t give a darn.” The scenery is farcical; the lake that Daffy paddles across is also a rug that Egghead lifts up. Violence becomes a further farce; when Egghead can’t hit the target on Daffy’s head, the duck moves closer to give him a better shot.

*Daffy Duck in Hollywood* (Avery, 1938) parodies management, with the office door reading “I.M. Stupendous Director.” A pig portrays a Schlesinger-esque character, with German accent and speech impediment. Daffy is in control, sabotaging the film in production and then editing the film stock, declaring, “I’ll give ‘em a reel feature.” His effort is live action with a surreal quality about it. A boxing match commentator announces that the fight is too brutal to watch, yet the fighters merely walk slowly around the ring. A beauty contest reveals the winner to be a larger than life girl who announces in a Katherine Hepburn-like voice, “I’m happy all over.” Avery addresses American culture and ridicules it. Daffy is rewarded for his film ‘masterpiece’ and replaces the director, who is served up as lunch before running away, echoing Daffy’s maniacal laughter. Insanity is the solution to every problem.

Avery's anarchy and flair for parody set Warner Bros. animation off on an as-yet-untrodden pathway, pushing the studio beyond the gag, the chase and the moral tale. There was a mental maturity to its content, argues Schneider, an adult sensibility that other studios began to emulate: it “transformed the tone and temperament of all American short-subject animation” (1994, p. 21). It became a mirror to societal trends, whilst simultaneously distorting and ridiculing them.

Warner Bros. animation emulated American film comedy in its method of breaking down barriers of conservatism within Hollywood. As Belton notes, ‘whatever a society represses frequently returns in the form of comedy to taunt it’ (1994, p. 135). The genre, he argues, is a genre “of the people;” in Latin it translates as ‘vulgus’, a term that belongs to the crowd (p. 143). For Belton, comedy must journey through a transition from acknowledging the disorder that disrupts society, to achieving some sort of social cohesion. Comedy “unleashes the leopard” (p. 141). It is here that we are reminded of art as a protest against the institution, as distinguished by the Frankfurt School.

Within Looney Tunes, this comedy becomes what Schneider calls “mordant satire” (1994, p. 23) with its references to issues that matter in society. The anti-bourgeois sentiments of the Looney Tunes filmography reflect American comedy of the time, particularly the biting humour of the Marx Bros. and their assaults on the American institution. Belton explains that comedy represents the disempowered, that the genre embraces change as it disrupts “the Status Quo” (1994, p.144).

Schneider argues that Bob Clampett’s cartoons, in particular, embrace “tastelessness” (1994, p. 82), and launch attacks on various aspects of society, as well as competitors. He cites *A Corny Concerto* (1943) as an example of this degeneration of taste, in which Elmer, as conductor, introduces each opera, whilst his tuxedo rides up to his chin, his cuffs flap around and his underpants are displayed. In the sequence *Tales from Vienna Woods*, Porky and hound hunt rabbit, only to discover that a squirrel with a gun is a more dangerous adversary. Their death throes evoke a sort of stumbling dance, mirroring and ridiculing Disney’s *Fantasia* (Schneider, 1994, p.82), until Porky and hound realise they have not in fact been shot. Only Bugs lies prone on the ground, covering his chest dramatically. When Porky pries Bugs’ hands apart, we see that Bugs is wearing a bra and the rabbit, outraged, leaps up to slap Porky before running away. Bugs remains Bugs: high art is both parodied and discarded.

The attack may partly be due to the fact that, according to Gregory Waller, “for almost all critics and journalists and reviewers of the thirties and early forties, the animated cartoon was quite literally Disney’s land” (White, 1998, p. 41). Conforming to American film comedy rules, however, Looney Tunes cartoons *address the people, belong to the crowd and disrupt the Status Quo*. As Adorno explains, “comic types are legible signs which represent the contorted bodies of revolutionaries” (Adorno, 1991, p. 12).

Chuck Jones was well aware of the audience. He explains “eventually every motion picture maker must face the crowd” (Furniss, 2005, p. 65). Schneider claims that Jones is the most intellectual and also analytic of the Warner Bros. cartoon creators:

Like Monet returning to Rouen Cathedral to capture the varying play of light on its façade, Jones returns to his situations to capture the play of his characters’ personalities, refracting in differing and beautiful ways. (Schneider, 1994, p. 107).

His was “only the best art, both timeless and universal” claims Peter Bogdanovich (Jones, 1989, “Introduction”). Jones took a psychoanalytical approach to his characters, imbuing them with complex traits that lent them an immediacy and a sense of believability. Through his unique approach, he refined and distilled the genre of animation (Schneider, 1994, p. 100).

On comedy, Jones explains that if we break out, “we become tragedians. If we keep it under control we remain comedians” (Jones, 1989, p. 39). The quest of his characters is about the “eternal battle to find rationality within the establishment” (p. 34); he discusses the goal of characters such as Chaplin and Coyote, that it is simply for food. He suggests that Daffy, Jack Benny and Woody Allen, meanwhile, are attempting to attain “human dignity” (p. 36) and dignity and its loss become an important trait in Jones’ work (particularly within the characters of Bugs, Daffy, Porky and Elmer). Influences here clearly include Chaplin. Jones understands the essence of American comedy, as well as classical Hollywood cinema, and interprets animated comedy through a multi-layered approach,

with characters imbued with psychology.

His Bugs is a counter-revolutionary, reacting to situations and threats, a character “trying to remain alive in a world of predators” (Jones, p. 145). For Jones, the counter-revolutionary is more interesting; in *Bully for Bugs*, the rabbit declares war on the bull, but not until he has suffered defeat in battle. The same could be said of Jones, fighting to create economically viable cartoons within tight schedules and under the helm of producers who appeared ignorant about humour. When Eddie Selzer, Schlesinger’s hapless replacement, saw a sketch of a bull Jones had scribbled, he suggested that bull fights were not remotely funny. Jones decided to create a cartoon about one because, he comments, Selzer had never been right about anything (Furniss, 2005, p. 140). Schneider explains “like his long-eared hero, Jones doesn’t fight, he fights back” (1994, p. 186).

Billy Collins, poet laureate, describes Bugs Bunny in an article for the *Wall Street Journal* (2008):

He is everywhere at once

Buck-toothed

And spectacularly eared

He is armed with dynamite

He is the only one

Who really knows what’s up

Where there is conflict, Bugs attempts to resolve it; where there are disputes he offers solutions. He is an enigma, both intellect and wacky rabbit with a penchant for cross-dressing. Bugs is entirely self-aware; he observes the action as an omnipotent being and repeatedly breaks the fourth wall of cinema to address the audience. Connection disrupts the narrative flow, creating post-modern, confrontational animation; embracing yet simultaneously stepping beyond slapstick. Collins suggests that the Looney Tunes creators were reading French surrealist poetry by candlelight (2008). These films were self-aware, at times strange and riotous but always arresting. Jones, responding to a quote by Norman McLaren that animation is the art of movements that are drawn, comments that animation can therefore be applied to all spoken drama, from *Lysistrata* to *King Lear*, from *Waiting for Godot* to Chaplin and to Looney Tunes (Jones, 1994, p. 180).

One of the most important and, arguably, cultural films to emerge from Looney Tunes is *Duck Amuck* (Jones, 1953). It has been viewed as both ‘a parable of modern man’s powerless alienation from his environment and a hilarious “Merrie Melodie”’ (Schneider, 1994, p. 112). It remains Warner Bros.’ most critically acclaimed animation, with Louis Black calling it “a clinical study of deconstruction of a text” (Pilling, 1997, p. 210) and Alex Evans comparing it to the work of Samuel Beckett (2007, p. 378).

Daffy was created to be the antithesis of the rabbit; he is a “social misfit” claims Sandler (1998, p. 171). Jones’ duck is an outsider, “struggling to enter the mainstream” yet resisting it, (Schneider, 1994, p. 158). If we return briefly to Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the free spirit of man being in jeopardy within culture, we can see how Daffy, too, is quite literally subject to forces beyond his control. In *Duck Amuck*, Daffy is aware and yet not, his control is a fabrication, he is tormented by an off screen presence and his all American freedom is compromised as the cel collapses in upon him,

restraining him. Looney Tunes speak directly to the audience about freedom and its jeopardy; they become siphons of culture.

Within *Duck Amuck*, Daffy adheres to the rules of the art form, living and breathing within the cel. It soon becomes apparent however that the cel is untrustworthy, leading Daffy to ask the audience “alright, where am I?” (Jones, 1953).

Alex Evans claims that *Duck Amuck* is seminal through its exploration of the body, and its transfiguration. He suggests that presence and absence make the cartoon comparable with *Waiting for Godot*. Will the tormentor be revealed? How does absolute absence inform the work? Evans suggests that absence “represents a considerable departure from the history of animation/live action interactions” (Evans, 2007, p. 380). Previously, animated characters and real actors shared screen time in the work of Warner Bros. and Disney, as well as Trick films such as J. Stuart Blackton’s early cinema, in which the artist is clearly present, drawing the drawing. When Bugs is revealed at the climax of *Duck Amuck* as the artist, this is anything but reassuring, says Evans; the “responsible” figure is a toon (ibid).

The breaking of the fourth wall is significant in *Duck Amuck*; the traditional method of the audience eavesdropping on characters who function within the three walls of their environment, the fourth wall being the transparent one, is commonly broken in the Looney Tunes filmography. Auter and Davis conducted research that points to a heightened sense of audience enjoyment when the fourth wall is broken (1991, pp. 165-171). The inspiration for this can be seen as originating in Vaudeville. Klein interviewed a man who remembered the vaudeville acts and how accessible they were to the audience and Klein notes the importance of Vaudeville to cinema, with both appearing on the same bill at many theatres. He cites Jones’s *One Froggy Evening* (1957) as a clear example of this and Jones agrees that his frog was “a little vaudevillian” (Klein, 1993, p. 21).

Auter and Davis suggest that viewers feel an increased interest and become involved in the action; they move from passive to active participants as Looney Tunes characters draw them in and whisper asides to them, usually at the expense of the other protagonists (1991, pp.165-171). Bugs does this repeatedly, at Daffy’s or Elmer’s expense. In *Hare Remover* (Tashlin, 1946), he remarks to the audience “what do ya know! This stuff works!”, whilst in *Rabbit Punch* (Jones, 1948) he escapes the boxing ring after 110 rounds with a formidable opponent, and apologises for the film breaking to the audience, before holding up a pair of scissors and quipping “confidentially, that film didn’t exactly break.” In essence, the reimagining of the fourth wall in Looney Tunes cartoons creates a connection and simultaneously a deconstruction of the text.

Pilling observes that the entrance of the creator into the film (in the case of *Duck Amuck*, Bugs as artist into Daffy’s world), creates an incarnation or “incartoonation” and that this transforms the world of the cartoon, introducing a “magical ontological concreteness” that gives the character a reality (Pilling, 1997, p. 212). Animation becomes limitless within *Duck Amuck* in particular, through the cartoon’s ability to dissect itself and allow characters to step into and out of the frame. Bugs lives beyond the confines of the cartoon and its scenery, whilst Daffy is tortured within it. Self-awareness is revolutionary here, the medium of animation becomes transformative whilst still retaining its essential



anarchic core.

Groening discusses the “transcendental lasting artistic value” of Jones’ work (Jones, 1989, p. 5). Jones himself talks of the logic and philosophy that underpin the Looney Tunes characters (p. 200). The frame, for example, is unable to contain Bugs; he “stands back from a situation, analyses it, and makes his move” (Thompson cited in Jones, 1994, p. 239). Jones’s psychoanalytical approach to his Toons creates a blurring of the lines between the cartoon and live action; the psychological coherence of characters present in American cinema, as discussed earlier, transfers readily onto the Looney Tunes cel.

Arguably the most iconic and groundbreaking work to emerge from Warner Bros. animation, and one that demonstrates genre defiance, high art yet hilarious parody, is *What’s Opera Doc* (Jones, 1957).

This cartoon is a Wagnerian opera, featuring genuine catharsis, but simultaneously role and gender reversals that reveal its heart to be a true Looney Toon. If Bourdieu argues that culture is a game and that the game is not static, surely *What’s Opera Doc?* is a vivid validation of this. Bourdieu’s analysis is based on position-taking in culture; what position does Looney Tunes take, and what position do we, the audience, take, in this seminal work? Clampett’s earlier *A Corny Concerto* (1943) dabbled in high art but settled on parody as its weapon, with Disney clearly in its sights. His “tastelessness,” hilarious in its execution, included what would become Bugs’ regular penchant for cross-dressing. Thus high art is addressed, dissected and parodied in Clampett’s film, the attack is palpable. In *What’s Opera Doc?* the lines become blurred between comedy, tragedy and beauty.

Using 104 backgrounds instead of the customary 64, the film is informed by sophisticated animation, mirroring Russian ballet dance sequences (Maltin, 1987, p. 268). The earlier clumsiness of Bugs and Elmer in *A Corny Concerto* is replaced by grace; Bugs’s body reveals transformation, argues Evans, and this is the heart of performance (2007, pp. 378-388). Boundaries are crossed, the relationship between hunter and rabbit remains familial but Bugs’s gender experimentation challenges these roles, pushing them to their limit. Judith Butler’s theory of gender representation applies itself particularly well to animation because of its idea of performance, and Sandler discusses this with regards to Bugs’s cross-dressing in *Reading the Rabbit* (1998, pp.154-172). Butler argues that through repetition of performance, the “action” of gender is established (1990, p. 191). Gender reveals itself to be a farce in *What’s Opera Doc?* Elmer, duped once more by Bugs, steers the opera into the realm of tragedy, conjuring thunder and lightning to thwart his foe (also referencing the figure of the Chernabog in Disney’s *Fantasia*).

The familiar relationship between rabbit and hunter, having been reimagined to represent two lovers, reverts back through violence into territory we understand, yet this is daring filmmaking, as ‘high comedy’ is juxtaposed with slapstick and tragedy, to attain a plateau of catharsis through Bugs’s death and Elmer’s reaction to it. The game of life and death, synonymous with Looney Tunes films, is somehow damaged in its balance; the performance in *What’s Opera Doc?* feels a little too real.

Multi-layering defines Warner Bros. cartoons; within the frame, the character’s struggles are the focus of the work, yet beyond the frame they gaze out at their audience, challenging the

preconceptions of the toon and making valuable connections that speak to us, as culture. We invest in these cartoons because of their humour, their anarchy and their interruptions. The genre of comedy becomes malleable, juxtapositions create further value (particularly within *What's Opera Doc?*), language leads to confrontation. In *Duck Amuck*, absence is more important than presence: who is the unseen tormentor, and why is he torturing Daffy? The revelation that it is Bugs perhaps does not appease us because we wonder how can a toon be omnipotent? Boundaries are repeatedly crossed in the stable of Looney Tunes films, conventions are defied. These cartoons are not 'deficient in grace,' they are self-aware, experimental, transformative and perceptive.

Jones once declared, "we never were conscious that we were doing anything that had any lasting quality" (Furniss, 2005, p. 209). Perhaps this is why the intentions of these filmmakers transfers onto the cel so effortlessly, fuelled by a sense of liberation and, simultaneously, of constraints and *knowingness*. In the words of the late Steve Schneider, himself a long-term Looney Tunes fan, "the Warner Cartoons are an important and joyous corner of American cultural history, as rich and rewarding in their way as any part of cinema" (Schneider, 1994, p. 33).

Jane Batkin holds an MA in Writing from City University and has had her work exhibited in the October Gallery in Bloomsbury. She works in the School of Film and Media as a Critical Studies Lecturer in Animation and in Media Production at the University of Lincoln.

## References

Adorno, T.W. (1991) *The Culture Industry – Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, London: Routledge.

Arnheim, R. (2004) *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition.

Auter, P, Davis, D. (1991) "When Characters Speak Directly to Viewers: Breaking the Fourth Wall in Television," *Journalism Quarterly*, 68 (1/2).

Belton, J. (1994) *American Cinemaamerican Culture*, London: McGraw-Hill.

Bianculli, D. (2004) *Steve Schneider on Looney Tunes*, NPR Radio. Available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4152305> (November 5). Date accessed: 4 December 2015.

Butler, J. (1998) "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution, An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* (40).

Collins, B. (2008) "Inspired by a Bunny Wabbit," *Wall Street Journal* (June 28). Available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121460099221711769> Date accessed 15 May 2014.

Crafton, D. (1998) "The View from Termite Terrace: Caricature and Parody in Warner Bros. Animation," in K. Sandler (ed.), *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Evans, A, (2007) "'All right: where am I?' Looney Tunes' Animation as Modernist Performance",

*Literature Film Quarterly*, 35 (1): pp. 378-388.

Ford, G. (2009) *Bright Lights Film Journal* 64, available at:

<http://brightlightsfilm.com/64/64texavery.php#.UwoT4URG-Hk> Date accessed 15 November 2015

Jay, M. (1973) *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jones, C. (1989) *Chuck Amuck : The Life And Times Of An Animated Cartoonist*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

King, S. (2013) "Egyptian Theatre gets Looney with 'Chuck Jones 101,'" *Los Angeles Times* (September 16). Available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/16/entertainment/la-et-st-chuck-jones-classic-hollywood-20130916>. Date accessed 15 May 2014.

Maltin, L. (1987) *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*, New York: Penguin Books.

Pilling, J. (1997) *A Reader In Animation Studies*, London John Libbey.

Putterman, B. (1998) "A Short Critical History of Warner Bros. Cartoons," in K. Sandler (ed.), *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.

Sandler, K. (1998) "Gendered Evasion: Bugs Bunny in Drag," in K. Sandler (ed.), *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Sarris, A. (1996) *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*, Boston: DaCapo Press.

© Jane Batkin Edited by Amy Ratelle